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THE WORKS OF THE AMERICAN ETCHERS.

INTRODUCTION.



AN ETCHER'S STUDIO.

From the Third Edition of Abraham Bosse's "Treatise," Paris, 1758.
Engraved on Wood by S. S. Kilburn.

SO much has lately been written about etching, that it seems almost like carrying owls to Athens to add even a short paragraph to an already considerable body of literature. But it may be well, nevertheless, if for no other reason, at least for the sake of completeness, to preface the short notices which will accompany "The Works of the American Etchers" by a concise account of the process, the peculiar characteristics, and the history of etching.

An etching is an impression taken from a metal plate, the sunken lines on which have been *etched*,—that is to say, bitten into the metal by the corroding power of some acid or mordant. Herein lies the most apparent

technical difference between a line engraving and an etching. In the former, each line is cut into the metal by the graver or burin, a steel instrument guided by the hand of the engraver; in the latter, the burin is entirely superseded by the action of the acid, thus involving a great saving of manual labor. To make it possible to bite the lines, without at the same time eating into the rest of the surface, the plate is covered with a layer of ground or varnish, upon which the mordant does not act. On this ground the etcher executes his design with a steel point or needle, each stroke of which removes the varnish. The plate is then exposed to the action of the mordant, which corrodes the copper wherever the point has laid it bare, while it cannot act where the ground remains. Difference in depth and width of line is produced by difference in time of biting, the finer and paler lines receiving only a very short biting, while those that are to be deep and dark are bitten longest. If the plate is not quite satisfactory after the first biting, it may be regrounded and rebitten to give it additional strength, or it may be scraped and ground down to reduce lines that are too strong; and it may finally receive a last finish with the dry point, a sharp needle, with which very delicate lines are drawn directly on the copper.

Plates produced entirely by the dry point,—that is to say, on which no mordant has been used, all the lines having been scratched directly on the bare copper—are called, rather inappropriately, dry-point etchings.

The technical characteristics of etching, upon which its artistic capabilities depend, may be summed up as follows:—1. Absolute freedom of line, as the point, if rightly used without too much pressure, plays upon the ground with even less friction than the pencil does upon paper. 2. A warmth of line and consequently a possibility of indicating color, far beyond that attain-

able in line engraving. The burin line, comparatively speaking, is sharp and clear cut, and it is this quality mainly which produces the cold, metallic effect so often complained of in works executed entirely with the burin. The etched line, on the contrary, is rugged and jagged along its edges, and this imparts "warmth" and life to it. 3. A range of color, varying from the faintest gray to the deepest velvety black, such as no other process offers, with the exception of engraving, which, however, is not within reach of the creative artist.

Much of the beauty of an etching depends upon the printing, which differs in many ways from ordinary plate printing. An artistically endowed printer, capable of understanding and following out the artist's intentions, can complement the latter's work in a manner which is unattainable by either point or burin.

It would be a mistake to suppose that the production of a good etching is an easy matter. Technically speaking, the difficulties are, no doubt, comparatively small; but only an artist of the very highest rank can make a really fine etching. Any one can scratch lines in the ground on the copper, and can bite these lines with the aid of some mordant; and no one can deny that the result is "an etching." But whether the proofs will be worth looking at must depend entirely on the artistic qualities of the etcher. No instance is on record of a really bad artist having made a good etcher. There are some instances of artists who have given their attention entirely, or almost entirely, to this art, so that their other productions are as good as unknown; but, as a rule, it will be found that a good original etcher—as opposed to the etcher who confines himself to the reproduction of the work of others—excels also in other branches of art, and that the very few etchers of the past, such as Rembrandt, who truly deserve the epithet of *great*, were also great painters.

It follows that etching, aside from its value as a reproductive art, has this advantage, that it lends itself to the creative artist, not only for the reproduction by his own hand of his paint-



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ings and designs, but more especially as *an original means of expression*. An etching by a painter from a painting previously executed takes about the same rank as a *replica*, and is, therefore, of great value. But a plate executed either directly from nature, or under the immediate impulse of an inspiration, is absolutely an original work of art. The best work of the best etchers is always that which was executed directly upon the copper, without the intervention of either sketch or painting.

The most important quality which an artist needs to make him a great etcher is the power of selection. It is this power which the French painters possess to a most eminent degree, and which gives to French art the leading position which it holds to-day,—the power to recognize at a glance the greatest truths or salient points upon which the character or sentiment of a subject depends, and to know what minor facts to suppress or to ignore. This process of selection, however, produces its best results only when it is spontaneous. An etching which endeavors to imitate spontaneity, but is really the product of repeated attempts and labored calculation, is very likely to be spiritless and artificial. To be able to reach the realization of his purpose at the first onset is the etcher's great secret of success. But the secret can be divined only by those whose natural ability is refined by long training. It is a serious mistake to suppose that the power of selection is within reach of the beginner: it is the ripe fruit, which only the artist of great experience may hope to gather.

Francis Seymour Haden's enthusiastic assertion that "the history of Rembrandt is the history of the whole art of etching" must not be accepted as literally true. Etching was practised in the sixteenth century by Dürer and Hopfer in Germany, and by Parmigiano and others in Italy. To these artists, however, the etched line was simply a substitute for the engraved line,—so much so that in some of Annibale Carracci's work we find even "the lozenges with a dot in the middle" of which the traducers of line engraving speak so badly. Those qualities of etching which we think of to-day when the art is mentioned, we do not find until we come to Rembrandt and his contemporaries, and as etching rapidly declined after their time, it may indeed be said, in a certain sense, that it was born in the seventeenth century, and that its history is identical with that of Rembrandt. It is a curious fact, that the influences which were to thwart the development of the art emanated from the same country which in our own century has brought it to life again,—from France. Even while Claude Lorrain, the greatest of the French painter-etchers of the past, and Rembrandt, were producing their beautiful plates, Jacques Callot and Abraham Bosse were doing their utmost to lead etching astray; for it was their endeavor, to use Bosse's own words, "to make their work appear as if it had been done with the graver." But the worst blow was given to etching, in the restricted sense in which we have been using the term, by the general ascendancy of French art in the eighteenth century. The hollow grace of the earlier part of this period, and the false classicism in vogue at its close, were fatal to the picturesque *abandon* and the mystery of chiaroscuro which are the principal charms of the art. It may truly be said that at the beginning of our century etching, as a painters' art, was wellnigh dead; and it was not until the rise of the Romantic School in France, which once more preached the gospel of color and of individuality, as against the doctrine of cold form upheld by the Academics, that it came to life again. This marvellous revival of etching forms a part of contemporaneous history, and it is needless, therefore, to do more than allude to it. The names of such original etchers as Delacroix, Daubigny, Jacque, Méryon, Lalanne, Fortuny, Whistler, and Haden, and of reproductive etchers like Gaucherel, Flameng, Unger, and Rajon, are familiar to all who care for art. Naturally enough the etchers of America, counting among the latest accessions to the ranks of the *aqua-fortistes*, are not so well known. But the series of plates which is to appear in the REVIEW will furnish abundant material to those who desire to follow the development of the art in our own country.

I.—R. SWAIN GIFFORD.



SWAIN GIFFORD, although still a young man,—he was born Dec. 23, 1840, on the island of Naushon, in Buzzard's Bay, Mass.,—counts among the oldest of American etchers, his love for the art dating back to the years of his boyhood, when, besides making many failures, he was principally successful in spoiling his clothes with acid. But, with Gregory's Dictionary of the Arts and Sciences, and afterwards with Chapman's Drawing-Book as guides, he early obtained a mastery of many of the processes employed, which stood him in good stead in his more mature efforts.

The following list comprises the most important plates thus far etched and published by the artist:—

Old Trees at Naushon Island.—Four plates, two dated 1864, the others 1865. Size of engraved surface, breadth $7\frac{1}{2}$ "; height from $10\frac{3}{4}$ " to 11". Withdrawn, being unsatisfactory to the artist.

Canadian Fishing Boats. 1868.—B. $10\frac{1}{2}$ "; h. $14\frac{1}{8}$ ". Etched on steel. This plate was never regularly published, and only a few proofs were printed.

On the Lagoon, Venice. 1877.—B. $13\frac{1}{6}$ "; h. $9\frac{3}{8}$ ". Etched on zinc, from a water-color painting.

Nonquitt Swamp. 1877.—B. $7\frac{7}{8}$ "; h. $3\frac{5}{8}$ ". Directly from nature, without subsequent retouching.

Dartmouth Salt Works. 1878.—B. $8\frac{7}{8}$ "; h. $5\frac{3}{4}$ ". On zinc, directly from nature, without retouching.

Evening. 1878.—B. $8\frac{1}{2}$ "; h. $4\frac{3}{8}$ ". From an oil-painting owned by a gentleman in Providence.

The Hay Rick. 1878.—B. $5\frac{1}{8}$ "; h. 3". Directly from nature, without retouching.

Nonquitt Bluff. Sept. 1878.—B. 3"; h. $5\frac{7}{8}$ ". Directly from nature, without retouching.

Padanaram Salt Works. 1878.—B. $13\frac{1}{2}$ "; h. $6\frac{9}{16}$ ". The most important of the artist's later plates.

The Path to the Shore. 1879.—B. $7\frac{5}{8}$ "; h. $4\frac{1}{8}$ ". Mostly from nature, but finished in-doors. Mr. Gifford had the kindness to execute this plate especially for the AMERICAN ART REVIEW.

Mr. Gifford prefers to use the methods employed by the old etchers. He completes the drawing on his plate when working out of doors, and then bites it in with nitric acid. Of all the new improvements he has only adopted the etching-tray, instead of the bordering wax, an improvement which, by the way, is not as novel as some people seem to think. Sebastian Le Clerc (1637-1714) already employed it, and it is described and figured in the third edition of Bosse's "Treatise." In the little vignette at the head of the Introduction to this notice, which is taken from Bosse's book, it will be seen that the young man to the right is etching a plate in the tray. Mr. Gifford also occasionally employs what might be called "the reverse process"; that is to say, he etches the dark parts first, and then passes on to the lighter and lightest, thus avoiding the necessity of "stopping-out." It is evident that this method can be used only for work done from previous sketches, unless Haden's process of etching in the bath is adopted. But Mr. Gifford thinks that "the process which Rembrandt got so much out of" is quite good enough for him. In spite, however, of his admiration of the great Dutch master, he does not make a very extended use of the dry point. His skies are generally put in or finished with this instrument, and it is also called in occasionally to strengthen a tint; but generally speaking this artist's works are remarkably good specimens of pure etching. In the *Dartmouth Salt Works*, for instance, the acid has done every bit of the work, to the absolute exclusion of the dry point.

In the quality of "frankness," to use a term first naturalized in English by Mr. Hamerton, we believe, Mr. Gifford is not excelled by any other American etcher. He has learned to a high degree the art of saying much with little, and therefore makes every line tell. As a wonderful rendering of aerial perspective, producing the impression of the immensity of space with the aid of but few elements, the large plate entitled *Padanaram Salt Works* is especially worthy of notice. Most of Mr. Gifford's etchings are tuned to that phase of nature in which the diffused light of a gray sky, and the consequent absence of strong contrasts, envelops everything in an atmosphere of sadness. The low horizon adopted, no doubt, contributes to the production of this effect, while the opposite impression, received when looking at *Nonquitt Bluff*, and at the plate which accompanies this number of the REVIEW, is in a measure due to the higher lifting up of the spectator.

In the choice of his subjects Mr. Gifford is thoroughly American, only one of the plates so far published by him representing a foreign scene. The Padanaram Salt Works are in the township of Dartmouth, and about half a mile from the Dartmouth Salt Works. Nonquitt, a watering-place on the western side of Buzzard's Bay, is also situated in the town of Dartmouth, six miles from New Bedford, Mass. The artist has a summer house there, where he does his summer work. *The Path to the Shore* is a bit of Massachusetts coast scenery, in the vicinity of New Bedford. A good lesson to those who are continually complaining that there is no art atmosphere in America! In the words of Longfellow:—

"O thou sculptor, painter, poet!
Take this lesson to thy heart:
That is best which lieth nearest;
Shape from that thy work of art."

S. R. KOEHLER.